

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY NASSAU

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8406

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TAGS: CGEN CFED SOPN (VESCO, ROBERT)

SUBJ: ALLEGED PLOT TO KIDNAP OR MURDER ROBERT VESCO

1. THE FOLLOWING MEMORANDUM WAS GIVEN TO THE EMBASSY BY THE EDITOR OF THE TRIBUNE, ONE OF THE WELL KNOWN LOCAL NEWS-PAPERS IN NASSAU. THE AUTHOR OF THE MEMORANDUM IS BENSON MCDERMOTT, A FORMER ASSOCIATE OF ROBERT VESCO.

2. THE EMBASSY WOULD APPRECIATE THE DEPARTMENT'S VIEWS REGARDING THE ALLEGATIONS IN THE MEMORANDUM LINKING USG AGENCIES WITH MR. JAMES W. WILKINS. THE TRIBUNE EDITOR WILL NOT PRINT STORY UNTIL CLEARED BY HIS ATTORNEY. STORY WILL PROBABLY BE PRINTED IN AFTERNOON PAPER TOMORROW, JULY 15. WE WOULD APPRECIATE DEPARTMENT REPLY PRIOR TO NOON TOMORROW.

QUOTE MISSION TO COSTA RICA -- KIDNAP OR KILL ROBERT VESCO

BY BENSON MCDERMOTT

A 27-YEAR-OLD RESIDENT OF FLORIDA, WITH FIVE CONVICTIONS FOR FELONIES IN THE UNITED STATES, ENTERED COSTA RICA LAST APRIL FOR THE SPECIFIC PURPOSE OF KIDNAPPING OR KILLING ROBERT L. VESCO.

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HIS TRIP WAS FINANCED BY AGENCIES OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

OF THE UNITED STATES, A FACT ADMITTED TO THE NEW YORK TIMES LAST MONTH BY ROBERT B. FISKE, FEDERAL ATTORNEY FOR THE SOUTHERN DISTRICT COURT OF NEW YORK. FISKE, HOWEVER, DECLINED TO DISCLOSE TO THE TIMES THE PURPOSE OF THE TRIP. IT WAS, HE TOLD THEIR REPORTER, "A UNIQUE SITUATION."

THE WOULD-BE KIDNAPPER OR ASSASSIN IS NAMED JAMES W. "SKIP" WILKINS, JR. HE HAS BEEN CONVICTED OF AGGRAVATED ASSAULT AND BATTERY, FOR WHICH HE SERVED A YEAR IN PRISON IN TAMPA, FLORIDA, AND OF ALTERING A FLORIDA MOTOR VEHICLE TITLE, UTTERING, BUYING AND RECEIVING STOLEN PROPERTY AND GRAND LARCENY. HE IS CURRENTLY ON PROBATION UNTIL LATE IN 1980.

THROUGH A CONTACT AT TAMPA'S STATION WFLA-TV, JOE MANNION, WILKINS SAYS HIS STORY WAS RELAYED TO THE TIMES BY DWAYNE BRADFORD AND THEY PUBLISHED IT, IN PART, ON JUNE 20. THE MIAMI HERALD PICKED IT UP ON JUNE 21. THROUGH MY OWN CONTACTS IN FLORIDA I WAS ABLE TO LOCATE "SKIP" WILKINS AND I MET WITH HIM IN TAMPA LAST THURSDAY (JULY 8, 1976).

TWO QUESTIONS ARISE AND DEMAND ANSWERS. THE FIRST IS WHY WOULD SENIOR REPRESENTATIVES OF THE NEW YORK SOUTHERN DISTRICT COURT, THE SECURITIES AND EXCHANGE COMMISSION AND THE FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION ENTRUST A MISSION OF THIS NATURE TO A MAN WITH FIVE CONVICTIONS ON HIS RECORD? RECENT DISCLOSURES IMPLY THAT THERE ARE IN U.S. GOVERNMENT AGENCIES MEN BETTER QUALIFIED AND TRAINED FOR SUCH WORK. THAT QUESTION IS ANSWERED, AT LEAST IN PART, LATER.

THE SECOND QUESTION IS, WHY WOULD ANY MAN BE WILLING TO TALK TO THE PRESS ABOUT HIS VERY PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT IN A KIDNAPPING OR MURDER PLAN? AND "SKIP" MAKES NO BONES ABOUT HIS TOTAL INVOLVEMENT: "THEY WEREN'T FOOLING WITH ME, AND I WASN'T GOING TO FOOL WITH THEM," HE TOLD ME.

THE "THEY" ARE: ELLIOT SAGOR, THEN ASSISTANT FEDERAL ATTORNEY FOR THE SOUTHERN DISTRICT COURT OF NEW YORK (SINCE THE TIMES DISCLOSURE HE HAS GONE INTO PRIVATE PRACTICE); JACK LOWE, ALSO AN ASSISTANT FEDERAL ATTORNEY FOR THE SOUTHERN DISTRICT; DAVID ROSS, LEGAL ADVISOR TO THE SECURITIES AND EXCHANGE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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COMMISSION; THOMAS DOONAN AND CARL BOGAN, SPECIAL OFFICERS OF THE FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION. BOGAN, WILKINS CLAIMS, ALSO USED THE NAME ROBERT ANDREA.

THE ANSWER TO THE SECOND WHY IS THAT "SKIP" FEELS THAT HE HAS BEEN "SHAFTED" BY THE PEOPLE WHO AUTHORISED AND FINANCED HIS ABORTED MISSION. HE WAS PROMISED, HE ASSERTS, THAT HIS CRIMINAL RECORD WOULD BE ERASED FROM THE RECORDS AND HIS PROBATION

REMOVED; HE WAS PROMISED REIMBURSEMENT OF ANY EXPENSES HE INCURRED, AND, INDIRECTLY, HE SAYS, OTHER FINANCIAL BENEFITS. NONE OF THOSE UNDERTAKINGS HAVE BEEN HONOURED, HE CLAIMS. WITH HIS RECORD, HE CAN'T GET A JOB, ALTHOUGH HE IS A PILOT, HAS A MARINER'S LICENCE, IS A LOCKSMITH ("THAT CAUSED SOME RAISED EYEBROWS WHEN THEY FOUND OUT," HE COMMENTED) AND HAS A BLACK BELT IN KARATE. HE FEELS THAT HE HAS BEEN USED AND THEN TREATED SHABBILY WHEN HE FAILED TO CARRY OUT HIS MISSION.

"SKIP" WILKINS IS AN ATTRACTIVE YOUNG MAN. HE LOOKS YOUNGER THAN HIS 27 YEARS, STANDS ABOUT SIX FEET, POSSESSES BLOND GOOD LOOKS AND IS POWERFULLY BUILT. WHEN HE TALKS TO YOU HE LOOKS YOU STRAIGHT IN THE EYE. HE WAS BORN IN TAMPA AND HAS LIVED THERE MOST OF HIS LIFE. HE HAS BEEN MARRIED TWICE AND HE AND HIS SECOND WIFE HAVE THREE YOUNG CHILDREN. HIS DREAM IS TO LIVE IN A COTTAGE ON A MOUNTAIN SIDE AND WORK FOR HIS FAMILY. HIS REALITY IS THAT HE CANNOT FIND A JOB OF ANY SORT, AND, HE SAYS: "I DO NOT HAVE ANY FUTURE IN THEIR (THE U.S. GOVERNMENT'S) SERVICE. I KNOW THAT, AND ONE OF THESE DAYS I'M GOING TO GET KILLED." HE DOESN'T SCARE EASILY, AND HE MAKES THE STATEMENT CALMLY.

WILKINS IS NOT CERTAIN ABOUT WHY HE WAS SELECTED FOR THE MISSION TO COSTA RICA, BUT HE HAS A THEORY. FOR THE PAST THREE YEARS, IN SPITE OF OR BECAUSE OF HIS RECORD, HE HAS DONE WORK FOR THE FEDERAL DRUG ENFORCEMENT AGENCY AND THE U.S. MARSHALLS SERVICE THROUGH HIS CLOSE ASSOCIATION WITH MITCHELL NEWBURGHER, U.S. MARSHALL FOR THE MIDDLE DISTRICT OF TAMPA. ABOUT A YEAR AND A HALF AGO, AS THE RESULT OF A TELEPHONE CALL FROM NEWBURGHER WILKINS WENT TO HIS OFFICE WHERE HE WAS HANDED A SUBPOENA ORDERING HIM TO GO TO THE UNITED STATES COURT HOUSE IN THE SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF NEW YORK. THAT WAS HIS FIRST MEETING WITH SAGOR, LOWE, ROSS, DOONAN AND BOGAN. HE HAS STATED LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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THAT ON THAT OCCASION THEY ASKED HIM QUESTIONS ABOUT HIS PREVIOUS VISITS TO COSTA RICA, DISCUSSED HIS WORK WITH THE DEA AND U.S. MARSHALL SERVICE, AND ASKED HIM IF HE WOULD BE WILLING TO GO TO COSTA RICA ON THEIR INSTRUCTIONS.

HIS ANSWER WAS AN UNEQUIVOCAL "YES" BECAUSE, AS HE EXPLAINS IT, THE OFFER TO ERASE HIS CRIMINAL RECORD WAS AN IRRESTIBLE INDUCEMENT: UNDER THE TERMS OF HIS PROBATION, THE LAW IN FLORIDA PROVIDES THAT HE CAN NOW BE PICKED UP AT ANY TIME AND PUT AWAY FOR LIFE. HE SPECULATES THAT THE AUTHORITIES MAY HAVE BELIEVED THEY HAD FOUND IN HIM A MAN WHO COULDN'T AFFORD TO SAY "NO" TO WHATEVER MISSION THEY PROPOSED.

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ACTION ARA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSO-00 SS-15 NSCE-00 NSC-05 L-03 SCA-01

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WITH THAT BACKGROUND, HERE IS "SKIP'S" INCREDIBLE STORY, IN PART AS HE TOLD IT TO ME AND IN PART FROM INFORMATION HE HAS GIVEN IN TWO AFFIDAVITS SWORN TO BY HIM IN SAN JOSE AND MIAMI.

ON APRIL 21 OF THIS YEAR WILKINS ARRIVED IN COSTA RICA FROM NEW YORK ABOARD PAN AMERICAN FLIGHT 541. WHEN YOU'RE ON PROBATION YOU CANNOT LEAVE THE UNITED STATES, SO THERE IS THE INFERENCE THAT WILKINS HAD OFFICIAL CLEARANCE. HE SAYS THAT HIS INSTRUCTIONS WERE TO CALL EITHER ANDREA OR DOONAN EVERY THREE DAYS, AND IN HIS CALLS HE WAS TO USE CODE NAMES FOR VESCO ("VICKY") AND HIS ASSOCIATES.

IN RESPONSE TO MY QUERY AS TO WHETHER HIS MISSION HAD INCLUDED ANY ACTION AGAINST ANYONE ELSE ASSOCIATED WITH VESCO, WILKINS SAID: "THEY WOULD HAVE BEEN HAPPY IF I'D GOTTEN ANY ONE OF THEM."

ALTHOUGH HE ENTERED COSTA RICA USING HIS CORRECT NAME, WILKINS REGISTERED AT THE BRAMADERO HOTEL AS "JOHN TURNER." IF THAT REGISTRATION WERE EVER QUERIED HE INTENDED TO SAY THAT ON HIS LAST VISIT HE HAD HAD PROBLEMS WITH A GIRL AND HE WANTED TO AVOID ANY CHANCE OF HER TRACKING HIM DOWN.

AS THE RESULT OF A PHONE CALL BY "TURNER" TO VESCO'S SECRETARY ON APRIL 25, VESCO CALLED "TURNER" AT THE BRAMADERO HOTEL ON LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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THE MORNING OF APRIL 26. "TURNER" TOLD VESCO THAT HE HAD "VERY INTERESTING INFORMATION ABOUT THE ACTIVITIES OF THE SOUTHERN DISTRICT COURT OF NEW YORK." WILKINS SAYS THAT WAS PART OF HIS PLAN TO INFILTRATE THE VESCO ORGANISATION AND, IN FACT, HE WAS INVITED TO GO TO SAN JOSE, WHERE HE REGISTERED AT THE DIPLOMAT HOTEL, AND LATER TALKED WITH VESCO.

ON THE EVENING OF APRIL 27 "SKIP" TELEPHONED DOONAN AND I HAVE SEEN WHAT IS REPORTED TO BE A RECORD OF THEIR CONVERSATION. WILKINS ADVISED DOONAN THAT HE BELIEVED HE WOULD GET WORK WITH "VICKY", BUT HE THOUGHT HE MIGHT HAVE TO STAY IN COSTA RICA FOR AS LONG AS THREE WEEKS -- AT WHICH NEWS DOONAN EXPRESSED SURPRISE, BUT HE DID AGREE, AT THE REQUEST OF WILKINS, TO ARRANGE WITH SAGOR "TO SEND ME (WILKINS) MONEY." (LATER WILKINS WAS FOUND TO HAVE IN HIS POSSESSION A HAND-DRAWN MAP SHOWING THE LOCATION AND ACCESSES TO THE VESCO FAMILY'S ESTATE IN CABO VELAS, GUANACASTE.) ON THE MORNING OF APRIL 29 WILKINS, ACCORDING TO A REPUTED TRANSCRIPT, TELEPHONED ANDREA AND THEY DISCUSSED WHAT WILKINS SHOULD DO IF HE WERE ARRESTED IN COSTA RICA WHILE CARRYING OUT HIS "WORK" (HE WAS TO CONTACT THE U.S. EMBASSY THERE IMMEDIATELY), AND THE METHOD OF AN ESCAPE TO THE U.S. ZONE OF THE PANAMA CANAL.

BUT "SKIP'S" PLANS, WHATEVER THEY WERE, WERE ABORTED. ON THE NIGHT OF APRIL 30, NINE DAYS AFTER HIS ARRIVAL, HE WAS VISITED AT HIS ROOM IN THE DIPLOMAT HOTEL BY PERSONS WHO SAID THEY WERE FROM THE IMMIGRATION AUTHORITIES. ACCOMPANYING THEM WAS LESLIE WILSON, OWNER OF THE HOTEL. WILKINS WAS TOLD THAT IT HAD BEEN LEARNED THAT HE WAS LOOKING FOR A JOB IN COSTA RICA AND HE WAS INFORMED THAT TO DO SO WITHOUT PRIOR CLEARANCE WAS ILLEGAL. THEY INVITED HIM TO LEAVE WITH THEM AND WILKINS ASKED TO SEE THEIR IDENTIFICATION. HE CAN, HE SAYS, GET BY IN SPANISH, BUT HE ASKED WILSON, WHO IS FLUENT IN THE LANGUAGE, TO CHECK THE CREDENTIALS HE WAS SHOWN. WILSON'S REACTION WAS: "LOOK, PAL, YOU'D BETTER DO WHAT THEY ASK -- THESE PEOPLE ARE FROM THE MINISTRY OF SECURITY*"

WILKINS ASKED TO BE ALLOWED TO CALL THE U.S. EMBASSY, BUT HE WAS TOLD (WHICH HE KNEW TO BE UNTRUE) THAT THERE WOULD BE NO ONE THERE AT THAT HOUR OF THE NIGHT. IN THE EVENT, HE SPENT THE NEXT 21 DAYS IN THE SAN JOSE PENITENTIARY IN LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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WHAT HE SAYS WERE THE MOST APPALLING CONDITIONS IMAGINABLE. HE WAS NEVER CHARGED WITH ANY OFFENCE DURING THAT PERIOD WHICH ONLY FINALLY CAME TO AN END, HE BELIEVES, BECAUSE HE WAS ABLE TO SMUGGLE A NOTE TO THE U.S. EMBASSY ON THE INSIDE OF AN

EMPTY CIGARETTE PACKAGE. THE MESSAGE, HE SAYS, WAS CARRIED BY A PRISON GUARD.

AFTER GIVING THE COSTA RICAN AUTHORITIES A SWORN STATEMENT ABOUT THE TRUE PURPOSE OF HIS VISIT TO THAT COUNTRY, HE WAS RELEASED AND FLOWN TO MIAMI WHERE HE WAS MET BY DOONAN WITH A SUBPOENA ORDERING HIM TO NEW YORK FOR A DE-BRIEFING.

IN HIS AFFIDAVIT, GIVEN IN SAN JOSE, WILKINS RELATED HOW IN APRIL OF THIS YEAR HE HAD BEEN ASKED BY SAGOR TO COME TO NEW YORK. HIS RESPONSE THAT HE HAD NO MONEY TO MAKE THE TRIP WAS COUNTERED BY AN INSTRUCTION TO GO TO THE U.S. MARSHALLS' OFFICE IN TAMPA AND PICK UP A VOUCHER AND TICKETS. HE WAS SERVED THERE WITH A SUBPOENA SIGNED BY SAGOR DIRECTING HIM TO MAKE THE TRIP TO NEW YORK. HIS QUERY ABOUT HIS PROBATION STATUS WAS ANSWERED BY AN ASSURANCE THAT NEWBURGHER WOULD ARRANGE MATTERS WITH HIS PROBATION OFFICER. ONCE IN NEW YORK, WILKINS HAS DEPOSED, HE MET WITH SAGOR, ROSS, DOONAN AND BOGAN, AND IT WAS DURING THAT MEETING THAT THE KIDNAPPING AND POSSIBLE MURDER OF VESCO WAS DISCUSSED.

WILKINS SAYS HE WAS NOT DIRECTLY OFFERED THE ASSIGNMENT OF KIDNAPPING OR MURDERING VESCO. BUT HE WAS ASKED, BY ROSS HE SAYS, IF HE "KNEW ANYBODY WITH THE CAPABILITIES TO ASSASSINATE MR. VESCO, AND IF SO WHAT DID HE THINK THE COST WOULD BE?" ROSS, WILKINS CLAIMS, ALSO RAISED THE QUESTION AS TO WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF WILKINS WAS EVER "IN A POSITION TO PUT MR. VESCO IN THE TRUNK OF A CAR? AND THAT IF HE DID, WHAT WOULD HE DO THEN? HOW WOULD HE GET VESCO OUT OF THE COUNTRY?" THE QUESTION WAS NEVER ANSWERED.

HIS MISSION, "SKIP" SAYS, WAS TO GO TO COSTA RICA AND ONCE THERE HE WAS TO ACT AT HIS OWN DISCRETION: THE IMPLICATION HE ACCEPTED FROM THAT WAS THAT IT WAS HE WHO WAS TO CARRY OUT EITHER THE KIDNAPPING OR MURDER OF VESCO. AS A SIDELINE, HE WAS ALSO INSTRUCTED TO GATHER ANY INFORMATION POSSIBLE ABOUT ANY OF VESCO'S ASSOCIATES.

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WITH THE PROMISE OF A PURGING OF HIS CRIMINAL RECORD AND THE OFFER OF "AN UNSPECIFIED AMOUNT OF FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE UPON MY RETURN," WILKINS SAYS HE TOLD SAGOR AND THE OTHERS THAT "I WOULD ACCEPT ANY MISSION THAT THEY HAD FOR ME."

"SKIP" WILKINS HAS SUBSEQUENTLY TAKEN THE PRECAUTION OF RECORDING AN AMPLIFICATION OF THESE EVENTS IN AN AFFIDAVIT OF NEARLY 900 PAGES SWORN TO BY HIM IN MIAMI.

AS LONG AGO AS OCTOBER 13, 1975 ROBERT VESCO WROTE A LETTER

TO THE U.S. EMBASSY IN COSTA RICA IN WHICH HE RECORDED, IN
PART, THE FOLLOWING: "UNITED STATES FUNCTIONARIES HAVE PUBLICLY
STATED THAT THEY WILL UNDERTAKE ANY ACTION THEY CONSIDER
NECESSARY TO OBTAIN MY RETURN TO THE UNITED STATES, AND THAT
IF THEY CANNOT EXTRADITE ME THEY WILL RETURN ME IN ANOTHER
WAY."

IN THE LIGHT OF THE WILKINS STORY, HE'D BETTER BELIEVE IT*

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